

Obesity and Women's Health

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WomenHeart: The National Coalition for Women with Heart Disease advocates for equal access to quality care and provides information and resources to help women take charge of their heart health. Obesity poses a serious risk to maintaining heart health. Implementing a nutritious, heart healthy diet in combination with regular exercise can lead to a healthy weight and help women maintain cholesterol and blood pressure levels within normal limits. However, for the 68.6 million overweight and obese adult women who are not maintaining their weight within normal limits, (61% of the women in the U.S.) taking these steps toward achieving heart health is challenging.

The impact of obesity and overweight on heart health is significant. Obesity is associated with numerous comorbidities such as CVD, Type 2 diabetes, hypertension, certain cancers and sleep apnea/sleep-disordered breathing. Obesity and overweight predispose to or are associated with specific cardiac complications such as coronary heart disease, heart failure and sudden death. The relative risk for cardiovascular disease increases by 20% in women who are overweight and by 64% in women who are obese. The increasing prevalence of obesity is driving an increased incidence of Type 2 diabetes³. Women with diabetes are 2.5 times more likely to have heart attacks.⁴ People who are obese are 6 times more likely to have hypertension, which is another significant risk factor for heart disease. In short, obesity is associated with an increased risk of morbidity and mortality, and a reduced life expectancy. It is suggested that this life-shortening effect of obesity could rise as the onset of obesity occurs at younger ages. Moreover, the presence of health conditions associated with obesity adversely affects quality of life.

The impact of obesity on women's heart health is reflected in the basic mechanisms which are altered when body weight is greater than normal:

- Excess body weight increases metabolic demand, which results in increased total blood volume and increased cardiac output
- Cardiac output increases with total fat mass
- Overweight and obesity adversely affect heart structure and function
- Obesity leads to increased fat deposits and significant lipid deposits that can impair tissue and organ function
- Abnormal cellular adaptations that occur as a result may unfavorably affect the cardiac muscle

- Obesity diminishes the body's ability to control blood sugar, and over time the body is no longer able to keep blood sugar levels in normal range, increasing the risk of developing Type 2 diabetes, and the difficulty of treating Type 2 diabetes
- Obesity and depression, a risk factor for heart disease, commonly co-occur particularly among women.
- Obesity restricts movement resulting in reduced physical activity, which increases risk for heart disease.

Furthermore, the effectiveness of actual cardiovascular clinical evaluation can be compromised in the obese patient.

Obesity is definitely a barrier to making progress on reduction of heart disease. Maintaining a heart healthy diet and exercise routine is very challenging for most people; it can be particularly challenging immediately following a diagnosis of heart disease, since so many changes must be made at once. WomenHeart is working with volunteers and health care professionals to spread the word about women and heart disease through programs of education, awareness and support.

WomenHeart is committed to the fight against heart disease and believe that helping women achieve health weight is an essential focus of our mission. We will continue to promote efforts to help women make the necessary changes and choices to minimize the life shortening effects of obesity.

Recommendations:

- Promoting awareness regarding the connection between weight gain and heart health, and conversely, the connection between minimal weight loss and improved risk factors for CHD
- Encouraging women to “Know Your Numbers”, including weight, blood pressure, cholesterol, waist circumference and BMI
- Providing support and constant reinforcement through in person support groups and/or on line support to connect women with other women who have heart disease and are struggling to maintain a heart healthy lifestyle through diet, exercise and stress reduction
- Expanding support and education efforts that are culturally and linguistically appropriate in diverse communities (first Spanish language support network)
- Providing heart healthy recipes and food and nutrition tips in our newsletters and website

- Supporting the diet and physical activity recommendations for coronary disease that are included in the *Report of the Dietary Guidelines Advisory Committee on the Dietary Guidelines for Americans, 2010*.

We are pleased to be a member of the STOP Obesity Alliance and are excited by the opportunities the Alliance's Task Force on Women is creating to improve the heart health of women. Women Heart Champions work in their communities through education, advocacy and support to help women take control of their heart health with small steps that can lead to significant improvements.